

# INTRODUCTION

## I

IN AN AGE of specialists, Kenneth Burke's writings offend those who are content with a partial view of human motivation. He is offensive to many academicians because he cannot be stuffed into any of the bins whose occupancy brings fame and fortune in the groves of Academe. Yet Burke is nothing if not erudite. While he is the soul of gentility as a critic and, it may be added for the record, as a person, those who tangle intellectually with Burke soon learn to buckle on their heaviest armor for the fray. Many writers on communication use Burke without crediting their source, or they paraphrase without much understanding. Whether this practice is the result of guile or of ignorance it is hard to say, but if there is any modern thinker whose work has been pilfered shamelessly, it is Burke. Fortunately for the vitality of American social thought, however, Burke has attracted followers who are distinguished as much by their productivity as by their reverence.

Burke has been the cause of books by many men, and as writings inspired by Burke increase, we see that he is indeed the seminal figure of our time in the field of symbolic analysis. Not since the days of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, in America, or Bronislaw Malinowski, C. K. Ogden, and I. A. Richards, in Britain (to limit ourselves to these countries alone) has there appeared work of such importance. Those of us who believe that the manner in which we communicate determines the manner in which we relate as social beings have gone to school to Burke and will continue to do so. As poets, critics, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychol-

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ogists, or linguists, we read Burke to learn something about what happens in our relationships by virtue of the fact that we communicate through symbols, and, at the same time, we invent the symbols used in such communication. More than any other writer, Burke has taught us that the names we give to things, events, and people determine our behavior toward them. And he has done so not by repeating this *is* so, but by showing *how* it is so. For Burke is never content to exhort us to think in a certain way; he is a methodologist seeking always to develop tools for demonstrating the effect of symbols on human motivation.

There is no easy road to an understanding of Burke. He is at once one of the most compact and one of the most "panoramic" writers of our time. He makes his points in highly aphoristic style and, therefore, is highly quotable. But this very compactness creates a density of meaning that exhausts every resource of the reader. This difficulty ends, however, in challenge, not exhaustion or boredom. Burke's capacity to ransack a single discipline or to make sudden and intense forays into many subjects is unsurpassed. His swift sallies into various branches of knowledge make following him an exciting, if arduous, task.

Burke's erudition is staggering enough, and the way in which he stalks an idea through the thickets and jungles of ideas in which modern man dwells is sometimes bewildering. So also is his great capacity for bringing together perspectives that we have become accustomed to hold separate in our thinking. His search for what he calls "proportional" and "synthetic" propositions is one of the great intellectual adventures of our time. No one uses the classics, the "wisdom books" of our culture, so assiduously as Burke, but he also ranges far and wide in contemporary work. It is because of this eclecticism that a reading of Burke is such a rich feast for the mind. It used to be said that if a student could understand

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*The Education of Henry Adams* he was on his way to becoming an educated man. The same may be said about understanding the work of Burke. After a reading of Burke, we comprehend (many of us for the first time) what *problems* have engaged the attention of classical thinkers in various fields, but particularly in the field of communication. He rescues the classics from dogma and returns them to methodology. For some, Burke's use of the classics in the construction of theory and methodology is blasphemous, but it is a great step forward for those who are trying to understand why we behave like human and inhuman beings and who are not convinced that study of caged rats is a helpful approach to studying the behavior of men in society.

If any conviction deepens in the mind of the student of communication, it is the realization that, as Burke says, "experiments with organisms that do not use language cannot tell us anything essential about the distinctive motives of a species that does use language."<sup>1</sup> Words are not merely "signs"; they are names whose "attachment" to events, objects, persons, institutions, status groups, classes, and indeed any great or small collectivity, soon tends to determine what we do in regard to the bearer of the name. War on poverty has recently been declared. Yet no matter how much money is voted for the eradication of poverty, the first battle that must be won is the symbolic battle over how to *name* poverty. Are the poor *lazy, degenerate, shiftless, sick, evil, childlike, cunning, ignorant, proud, humble, victimized, or unfortunate?* The name that we give to poverty largely determines how we fight the war against it.

Burke demands that we become masters of *many* perspectives in order that we may understand *one* perspective. He

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change, An Anatomy of Purpose* (Los Altos, California: Hermes Publications, 1954), p. xvii; this edition, p. li.

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does not wish us to analyze the conditions of action as they exist in nature or in nature in the laboratories of modern science. He is not against science, even science that tells us that the world must be regarded as a great machine. Rather, he is against the teaching that science based on mathematics and the laboratory is the *only* science. He asks scientists to think about their instruments and methods of inquiry as a language comparable to any other language. The language of science is a symbolic structure that is determined as much by the nature of the symbols employed as by the social milieux in which science is practiced.

If, however, Burke attacks scientists who refuse to think of their instruments and techniques as part of a scientific act that, like any act, depends on the language in which it is expressed, he also attacks symbol analysts who refuse to clarify the way in which they arrive at their conclusions about the meaning of symbols. The danger of confusing science with the methods and techniques of science used in the past cannot be met by refusing to create models that define rigorously both the structure and the function of communicative action in society. If mind as the creator and generator of experience is to be treated as more than an accidental intruder in the realm of matter, then we must demonstrate the way in which the mind functions in communication. If the forms of thought are forms of reality, or what in human studies we think of as forms of action and passion, then what model of such form can we construct? And, further, how can we apply that model to the directly observable phenomena of sociation, namely, the way in which we relate in and through communication?

As we read Burke, it is not the weight of the intellectual baggage that strains our capacities. He tells us in the Prologue to this edition of *Permanence and Change*:

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Rather than thinking of magic, religion, and science as three distinctively successive *stages* in the world's history, the author would now use a mode of analysis that dealt with all three as aspects of motivation "forever born anew" in the resources of language as such.<sup>2</sup>

But it requires great effort to think about language as an instrument that causes *and* solves our problems. For, as Burke tells us, there is no such thing as perfect communication: "Only angels communicate absolutely."<sup>3</sup> For better or worse, the human condition is a condition of imperfect communication, and we solve our problems in society as best we can through recalcitrant and mystifying symbols that cause the problems we must yet solve if we are to act together at all. Thus, symbols are both blessing and curse—a blessing if we turn our study of their use into a *method* of social control, a curse if we let their power overwhelm us until we accept symbolic mystification as reality.

As Burke points out, the peculiar thing about the interpretations of life reached in communication is that we interpret our interpretations. We may think that the laws of physics are "immutable" (even though physicists do not think so), or we may believe that biological drives "condition" organisms, or that sociopolitical laws of some kind are the "laws of history," or, finally, that cosmic laws exist in the mind of God. But few of us have been taught to argue that communication has unchanging "laws" comparable to these. And even when we argue this point, it becomes difficult to do so because we know so little about the way in which communication really affects us. Yet, as we think about human motives, it becomes increasingly obvious that they depend on the forms of communication available to us as much as they depend on economic, political, social, sexual, or religious "interests."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxv (p. lix).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv (p. x).

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Motives arise and continue to exist in communication, and unless we are willing to assume that communication is some kind of random affair, or simply the wirelike "transmission" of interests and drives that are extra-symbolic, we must say *something* about the relationship between motives and the forms in which they are expressed.

Burke argues that symbolic systems in art, religion, science, philosophy, literature, and, indeed, in all phases of action are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. We cannot act together unless we know how to communicate with each other over the problems we must solve in order to act at all. In the act of communicating, we do not signal each other like semaphores; we *exhort* others, and ourselves, to act in one way and not in another. Before we act, we must "size up" the situation in which we must act. This "sizing up" can be illustrated by our use of proverbs. A proverb "characterizes" a situation and thus creates attitudes necessary to common action. In America, for example, we act together in many situations through the use of money. Americans must be imbued with what Max Weber has called the "Spirit of Capitalism," and a great share of our proverbial lore is devoted to keeping this spirit alive within us.

But proverbs are not simply guides to action, like signposts on a road; they are formed and stylized answers that affect us because the forms used arouse the same expectations of success, failure, or doubt within others as within ourselves. A symbol does not "trigger" us to do something that we were "ready" to do because it was "latent" within us, nor is it the expression of a power that exists beyond the symbol yet can be known and experienced only through the symbol. To say that money "triggers" the market or "releases" social energy is to overlook the fact that money functions as it does in America only because we have certain attitudes and beliefs about the proper ways of earning and spending money.

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Money, like all symbols, takes its meaning from action—that is, the manner in which it is *used* in human relationships. This use of symbols may be thought of as strategies in conduct that make it possible for us to “size up situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them.”<sup>4</sup> And these symbolic strategies, Burke insists, are observable because the situations in which we must act together are real; “. . . the strategies for handling them have public content; and in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance.”<sup>5</sup>

By “public content” Burke means that the forms of expression used in communication exist not solely within our minds but as forms having a public existence. *Huckleberry Finn* is not only a subjective experience of writer and reader; it is also a book that stands on the shelves of thousands of libraries and homes. It has meanings that have been hammered out in many discussions by critics, and it has been accepted by Americans themselves as a characteristic expression of American life. Yet, for reasons that will bemuse future historians of our age, symbolic works like *Huckleberry Finn* are supposed to have far less “reality” than some kind of extra-symbolic reality in space or even the symbolic forms of past history. We teach students that what “really happened” in Mark Twain’s time is to be found in history, and usually in the history of economic and political institutions. For, so we have been taught, there are economic “laws,” and in history there have been “real” men who did “real” things we can study.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is taken from Burke’s discussion, “Situations and Strategies,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form, Studies in Symbolic Action* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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Yet when we reflect for a moment on the reality of history (or memory or any record of the past) we discover that the "facts" of history, and all past experience as we recall it, are symbolic facts. We can only infer what Lincoln did; the only facts we have about him are what someone said he did, or what he said he did, or what others say about what he said. As Burke says:

People usually think that the non-symbolic realm is the clear one, while the symbolic realm is hazy. But if you agree that the words, or terms, in a book are its "facts," then by the same token you see there is a sense in which we get our view of *deeds* as facts from our sense of *words* as facts, rather than *vice versa*.<sup>6</sup>

The same may be said for purely biological "explanations" of motives in which it is argued that human culture can be explained as a mere "projection" of the body in its purely physiological nature. Experiments with organisms that do not use language cannot tell us anything essential about the distinctive motives of a species that does use language. As Burke said, and as zoologists are now beginning to recognize, even on an empirical basis, data of zoological research, in the process of being applied to the behavior of men need the corrective of a concern *with social motives as such*.

### 3

The heart of Burke's argument is simple enough, namely, that symbolic forms affect conduct because of the ways in

<sup>6</sup> Burke discusses this point in an essay, written in 1954, entitled "Fact, Inference, and Proof in the Analysis of Literary Symbolism," which was published originally in *Symbols and Values: An Initial Study* (Thirteenth Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), pp. 283-306. The quotation above is from page 284.



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which they affect communication, and thus all action. He is saying that motives lie not only in some kind of experience "beyond" symbols, but also *in* symbols. In sum, symbolism is a motive because symbolism is a motivational dimension in its own right. The way in which sex is symbolized largely determines the kinds of emotions we have about sex. This does not mean that somatic sexual "feelings" cannot be studied as we study any kind of somatic experience. But a feeling is not an emotion until the feeling is expressed in some form that "attaches" values to the somatic feeling. The proper study of emotions, therefore, is the study of the forms of their expression in social life. Obviously, it is at this point that many find Burke difficult to follow. The assumption that the way in which we express ourselves greatly determines the way in which we relate in society is a complete inversion of what many of us have been taught to believe about motives. According to this teaching, we "have" sexual "feeling" and then "discharge" it in some way, just as we "have" economic "interests" and then "express" them. It is the "interest" or "content" of the experience, not its form, that is "real."

In this view, as expressed in many contemporary accounts, society is thought of as some kind of machine that "gears" and "meshes" motives. There are symbols in what we call art, language, and communication, but these are something like the music of a merry-go-round, which sounds gaily over the whirr and clank of motors and gears that really make the wooden horses go. The music actually has nothing to do with the motive power of the machine. Music merely makes us "feel good," or, in more elegant discourse, "causes delight." Or, in what are called "scientific" views held by some (but by no means all) students of symbolic action, symbols can be treated as "things" that are independent of the context in which they occur or the forms in which they are expressed, because they possess "traits" or "characteristics" that can be

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“measured.” Such measuring is usually done through techniques developed in the physical sciences, for, so the reasoning goes, if what has been done in physics is science, then every science must become like physics. There are those, too, who believe that symbols are used as a kind of make-believe in which we construct “wishing-books” under the rubric that if wishes were horses beggars would ride; and, finally, tribal magicians have come to life in urban guise as publicists who use communication to exhort us to do our share as heroic consumers of everything that money can buy.

In none of these views are symbols important as symbols; for, implicitly or explicitly, those who hold such views believe that symbols do not affect conduct because the springs of action in society are really determined by something “behind” symbols. Symbols are at best but masks of “interests”—sexual, economic, political, or religious, as the case may be—and we tolerate the mask in social analysis only so long as it offers clues to the “interests” behind it. But the popularity of this view of symbolic usage should not blind us to its inadequacies. For, when we tear off the mask in stern resolve to do away with the “distortions” of symbols, the “interests” disappear with the mask. We discover that what we thought to be only a mask was a form that determined the content of the mask, just as the content, in turn, determined the problem we had sought to solve in the creation of the form. The study of forms—the *ways* in which we communicate—becomes then the study of motives, just as the study of contents—*what* we communicate about—does also. The symbolic or formal phase of the act is, therefore, no less real than its motor phase. If we are to understand one, we must understand the other.

We may disregard the forms symbols take in communication, or insist that since we have discovered no laws of order in symbolic patterns there can be no science of symbolic analysis. But these attitudes are rooted in dogma over “proper”

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ways of practicing science or are the result of a confusion of science with mathematics as the mathematics of space. Obviously, if we believe that science is an attempt to solve problems, we will try to develop methods and techniques for doing so. For, if we do not, we soon end up studying problems for which we already have developed techniques, rather than attempting to solve problems we need to solve. The incredible neglect of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and other such writings indicates that our failure to study symbolic phases of action may even threaten our very existence. The next Hitler will be armed with *both* nuclear and symbolic weapons.

But, whatever attitude we take toward symbolic analysis, it is impossible to read Burke unless we believe that the ways in which we communicate tend to determine the forms of our social relationships as well as, *per contra*, that the forms of our social relationships tend to determine the ways in which we communicate. As Burke says in his essay "On Human Behavior Considered 'Dramatistically,'" which appears in the Appendix to this edition of *Permanence and Change*:

Man being specifically a symbol-using animal, we take it that a terminology for the discussion of his social behavior must stress symbolism as a motive, if maximum scope and relevancy is required of the terminology.<sup>7</sup>

But in the very next sentence he is quick to add: "However, man being generically a biological organism, the ideal terminology must present his symbolic behavior as grounded in biological conditions."<sup>8</sup> And in his parenthesis to this statement, he says: "This statement is *not* the same as saying that symbolism is *reducible* to biology. *On the contrary*."<sup>9</sup> That is, we cannot say that words are but sexual puns, for if we

<sup>7</sup> *Permanence and Change*, this edition, p. 275.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

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do, we explain everything about courtship except why it involves love. Sex is not simply an "outlet," and woman is not merely a "sexual object." Those we love (and hate) are partners in a social relationship, and if we are to understand what is "sexual" about it, we must take this relationship into account, just as we must take into account what is "sexual" if we are to understand what is "social" in the relations between men and women.

To some it may seem like flogging a dead horse to belabor this point. But those of us who have been trying to work in the Burke tradition, and, like the writer, trying to stay within the guild of American social scientists, have discovered that our greatest difficulty comes precisely at this point. Some people simply do not believe that the study of communication is relevant to the study of social relationships. Others say that we have no "proof" of the kind familiar to them in the sciences of motion, and in terminologies grounded in sensory perception. Such attitudes have forced the communication theorist into a kind of scientific purgatory and have made it difficult for him to get on with the very necessary task of analyzing the social aspects of communication. And worse, this attitude reduces the reading of Burke to an interesting but irrelevant pastime. Those who see (and hear) society as The Great Machine that "gears" and "meshes" into fitful moments of "equilibrium" have even gone so far as to hint that readers of Burke are heretics who must be stamped out of the community of Big Science.

Serious critics of Burke do none of these things, of course. They point out that even if we take the first step toward an understanding of Burke and admit that symbols *are* motives,

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we have only begun our quest. The obvious next question is: *How* do symbols affect motives? It is Burke's answer to this question that marks his greatness. To describe Burke's complete answer would involve statements by experts from many disciplines, for Burke has been very careful to relate his theory of symbolic action to the resources of language itself as well as to many theories of social action. Therefore, *any* specialized view of Burke's work must be only a restricted perspective. The view taken here is that of the sociologist; therefore, readers who have interests in literature, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, art, or religion have every right to resent the heavy sociological weighting of Burke's viewpoint given in this introduction. But because *Permanence and Change*, as Burke himself says, is the book in which he places his greatest stress on the social aspects of meaning, there is some excuse for my heavy use of sociological views. It is impossible to understand *any* of Burke if we do not understand his view on social relations. Thus, *Permanence and Change*, and especially the present edition, with Burke's revisions, can serve as an excellent introduction to all Burke's writing.

As Burke makes clear, he came into his concern with social aspects of meaning through his study of meaning in literature. In *Counter-Statement*, which preceded *Permanence and Change* by four years, Burke considered the principle of socialization primarily in terms of literary form. He defines form in literature as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires."<sup>10</sup> A work has form "in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See page 124 of the section entitled "The Nature of Form" in *Counter-Statement*, (Phoenix edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 124-128.

<sup>11</sup> *Counter-Statement*, p. 141.

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This response occurs because the forms of art are not exclusively aesthetic. Purely formal properties are not unique to art; all experience is distinguished by them.

The accelerated motion of a falling body, the cycle of a storm, the gradations of a sunrise, the stages of a cholera epidemic, the ripening of crops—in all such instances we find the material of progressive form.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, “though forms need not be prior to experience, they are certainly prior to the work of art exemplifying them.”<sup>13</sup> When one turns to the creation of form by the artist, or to the enjoyment of it by an audience, “a formal equipment is already present, and the effects of art are involved in its utilization.”<sup>14</sup> In sum, the forms of art can be said to have “a prior existence in the experiences of the person hearing or reading the work of art.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while Burke, even as early as 1931, began to define the principles underlying the appeal of literature as literature, he also concerned himself with the question *how* people *use* art in their attempts to relate to each other. Burke is careful not to reduce art to sociology or to explain away the struggle of the artist to create forms that will help him to make sense of his relationship to his physical and social environment. In the section of *Counter-Statement* entitled “Lexicon Rhetoricae,” he offers thirty-nine propositions on the function of art in society. In proposition 20, “The Symbol,” he defines the symbol as “the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience.”<sup>16</sup> A poet who suffers from undeserved neglect may express his emotional response in self-pity, outrage, self-hate, or hatred of

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

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the existing social order. His sense of outrage may be so great and may recur so often as to color his whole view of life. He finds ever-new instances of man's depravity. Soon, outrage at depravity becomes an organizing principle of the poet's life. As he expresses his outrage in his work, he makes it a pattern of experience. His symbolization of outrage is then a formula that he uses to order his relationship to his world.

If the poet's readers also feel dissatisfaction with the conditions of their lives, they will turn to the poet's expression of outrage and make it their own. Symbols attain their greatest effect when the artist's and the reader's patterns of experience coincide closely. In the music of Bach, composer, artist, and audience reach profound expression in a drama of salvation shared widely and profoundly by all. Great art produces great moments of integration, but even on lower levels of expression in art we use symbols to clarify an otherwise unclarified complexity:

It [the symbol] provides a terminology of thoughts, actions, emotions, attitudes, for codifying a pattern of experience. The artist, though experiencing intensively or extensively a certain pattern, becomes as it were an expert, a specialist, in this pattern."<sup>17</sup>

In general, symbols appeal "either as the orienting of a situation, or as the adjustment to a situation, or as both."<sup>18</sup> We may use symbols to accept a situation, to correct a situation, to bring into consciousness submerged or repressed experiences, to free us from the burden of symbols that are no longer relevant to our problems, or to enjoy the play of symbols as such as in the enjoyment of "artistic" effects.

But symbols also have a power of their own; they cannot be explained simply by social or other kinds of effects. "When

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 156.

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the poet has converted his pattern of experience into Symbolic equivalent, the Symbol becomes a guiding principle in itself."<sup>19</sup> It is a "generating principle which entails a selection of different subtilizations and ramifications."<sup>20</sup> This selection distinguishes the use of symbols in art from their use in the dream. The dream obeys no principle of selection, whereas art, "which expands by the ramifying of the Symbol, has the Symbol as a principle of selection."<sup>21</sup> This "principle of selection" by which art largely determines, as well as is determined by, the social relationship is no different from the selectivity of symbols used in science. If we use mathematics, we soon find that we are selecting problems that can be solved by mathematics. If we use mechanical imagery in describing the relationships of men, it is not long before we are treating men according to the imagery we have used. Men are related to the machine, and, as automation increases, it is the man, not the machine, who is unemployed.

### 5

In *Permanence and Change* Burke shifts from considerations of the ways in which the purely formal qualities of art induce an audience to participate in the work of art and of the factors that interfere with such appeals. Here, he emphasizes the differences of perspective that we find in a world of much occupational diversity. In the "Prologue" written for this edition of *Permanence and Change*, Burke raises the question:

Why, in a world of many disparate perspectives, is the "poetic" perspective ("Man as Communicant") to be treated as foremost? Can the author make cogent claims

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.